

THE ART OF ADMINISTRATION

CREATING A SCHOOL CULTURE OF SUCCESS

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The practice of school administration is an art and creating a culture of success is its primary responsibility. The following tips and modeling behaviors are intended to provide an administrator with ideas, concerns, and advice to devise the most realistic and productive courses of action in the operation of a school, as well as, the formation of a successful, can-do culture. These tips are not intended to necessarily supply specific solutions for particular problems. They will, however, enable you to make the best decisions in any situation and, after all, decision-making is the essence of administration.

EXPECTATION FIELD THEORY

The Chief Administrator (Principal, Director, etc.) does not necessarily teach a single student directly but is responsible for educating all of them. This helps to explain the distinction between teaching which is a profession and education which is a business. The primary responsibility of the Chief Administrator is to develop a culture (atmosphere, environment, expectations, etc.) within which all participants (teachers, students, parents, staff, boards, community, etc.) are focused on achieving educational success and are working to attain that goal. This is the “Expectation Field Theory”. It is similar to the self-fulfilling prophecy concept.

The magnetic field created by a magnet cannot be seen but its effect is clearly visible. When you place a magnet under a piece of cardboard, sprinkle iron filings on it, and gently tap the cardboard, the filings, which had been in disarray, will line up neatly along the invisible magnetic lines of force. Once the Chief Administrator develops the educational expectation field, its unseen force will permeate every operation and activity. Critical decisions (about curriculum, discipline, practices, procedures, demeanor, activities, etc.) and all participants (teachers, parents, students, etc.) will align themselves in a consistent and productive fashion. It is similar to promoting positive thinking that leads to self-fulfilling prophecy. It will inspire everyone to have a “KA” (Kick Ass) performance attitude. Set high expectations and then..... exceed them!

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The essence of administration is decision making.

Good schools, when viewed from higher levels, are about economics as much as they are about education. In the United States, education is big business. You must have a good public school system if you want to retain business, attract new business, improve the economy, increase property values, reduce crime rates, and raise the standard of living. It makes no difference if you have children or if your children attend a nonpublic school. If you live in a community or own property in a community you are affected by the existing public school system.

Site-based management and market accountability are sound business principles that, when used properly, can produce successful schools.

Good business practices apply to the general operation of a school but not in the classroom. The classroom involves a professional relationship between a teacher and a student similar to the relationship between a doctor and a patient or an attorney and a client.

Parents are the primary clients (customers) of a school. Students are the raw material that receives value added services (education) through the teachers. As they get older, students may have a greater say in the selection of a school but they are influenced by their parents and friends.

Teachers are the ones who directly educate students and make a school successful. They are the most valuable and critical asset of any school. They are not so much employees of the school as they are partners in the school's efforts to maximize student performance. The "Rubber meets the Road" in the classroom.

Schools are communities that can be very different from one another due to different populations served, curriculum needs, targeted goals, backgrounds of teachers, ability of administrators, political realities, financial resources, physical facilities, parental support, neighborhood conditions, etc. There is no "cookie cutter" solution that will be successful with all schools. Any "Best Practices" approach must be adapted to address the existing conditions.

All students have the potential to learn. Our schools must see to it that all students reach their full potential and that is our performance goal, i.e., to "Max Every Child".

Keep in mind that great administrators are great leaders not because of the position they have over people but, rather, because people want to be led by them.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The major key to sustained improvement of public schools is to convert school boards and bureaucracies from directive bodies to supportive ones (systemic change) thereby increasing local control. Imagine the current system as a pyramid with the State Superintendent or Secretary of Education at the apex along with the State Board of Education. As you travel down the sides you encounter bureaucrats, local school boards, district officials and superintendents, and at the base you will find the individual schools, principals, teachers, students, parents, etc. This model is very stable, so stable that it is static.

Now invert the pyramid. The model is now dynamic. It can respond quickly to needed changes. The role of the former apex is even more crucial and difficult because it now supports the entire system.

Charter schools were originally designed (autonomous and market sensitive) to be different because of “How” they operated, and not necessarily just because of “What” they did. When computers were introduced in the late 40’s they performed small calculations quickly using a binary system. The estimated demand for them was very small (5 worldwide!). Today computers perform small calculations quickly using a binary system (the same as in the 40’s) and, yet, they are ubiquitous. Why? We changed “How” they operate. We went from vacuum tubes (requiring room-size computers, consuming large amounts of energy, generating great quantities of heat, etc.) to microchips. This was a quantum leap in technology that made it possible to place a computer on our laps or in our pockets. We must change “How” our public schools operate to realize a quantum leap in performance.

Substantial public school improvement has less to do with educational issues than with shifting power from school boards and bureaucrats to building administrators. The Brookings Institution has said we must cut the power cords between schools and school boards as well as bureaucracies because such bodies will never voluntarily give up power.

A bureaucracy focuses on compliance and not performance. The U.S. Department of Education said we must move away from rules-based governance (compliance) and move toward performance-based accountability. The roles of Boards and bureaucrats must be converted from directive to supportive. They should facilitate the exchange of ideas, successes, and failures among the independently operated public schools.

The Brookings Institution cited school boards and bureaucracies as potential obstacles to school improvement. Boards often have members who know little about running a school and, yet, they have the power to make final operational decisions. Politics and “pet peeves” can play a role with boards. Bureaucracies are more concerned about compliance (adherence, control, power, etc.) than performance. Principals and teachers are often referred to as educational professionals. They should be treated as such.

State funding should be delivered to schools more as block grants and less as line item budgets to provide principals with flexibility to use funds in a more effective and efficient manner. If legislators wish to award restricted funds they may do so only if they increase the general block grant by an amount equal to 50% of the restricted funds. (Okay, this is wishful thinking but worth considering!)

Bureaucrats tend to shy away from innovative ideas, whereas, good administrators will prudently and creatively move forward with new approaches to education keeping in mind that, it is easier to obtain forgiveness than to secure permission. Doing the same failing thing over and over again and expecting successful results is insanity. So says Al Einstein. We must change how we operate the public school system.

START-UPS

Start-up operations need a flexible generalist in charge. Policies and procedures can be finalized later.

Starting a school requires a vision that is clear, simple, and concise. All decisions that follow must flow from the vision in order to keep things consistent and focused.

Saying, “No”, to perfectly good ideas that don’t fit with the vision is one of the most difficult but necessary things to do. Don’t become a “Jack of All Trades” and a “Master of None”. Saying, “No”, is more difficult than saying, “Yes”, but somebody has to do it.

Leadership focuses on future goals. Management takes care of daily operations. New schools, especially, need strong leadership with managerial skills.

It’s good to discuss things but at some point you have to cultivate that old Nike Spirit and – “Just Do It!”

ADMINISTRATIVE SKILLS

(Personal Traits)

Lead by example. Model appropriate behavior.

Be willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done right. Even if it isn't one of your specific duties, if something needs immediate attention (answering the phone, sweeping the floor, emptying the trash, etc.), do it. There are no demeaning tasks and "moving up" the administrative ladder broadens your scope of responsibility for the success of the school and excludes nothing. You can follow up later to make sure the appropriate person takes care of whatever in the future. People will get the idea that the success of the school is everyone's responsibility and "pitching in" is part of the school's culture whether the action is part of your job description or not. The higher up you go, the more things you should be willing to do to get the job done.

You may never come up with a completely new idea but you can take several existing ones and forge them into a new concept. These tips are a good example of that.

You don't have to reinvent the wheel. You can use someone else's ideas. There is no shame in adopting and adapting a proven successful program, course of action, etc. Modified imitation can be a high form of flattery and success.

Accept blame and give credit. Everyone makes mistakes. The important thing is what you do after the error (admit it quickly even to students, correct it, don't deny it or try to cover it up).

Praise publicly, correct privately.

Treat everyone with respect.

Recognize and try to understand your opposition's concerns.

You are not allowed to publicly lose your temper. Have your "bad moods" in private but, at the same time, don't be sickeningly sweet either. If the situation or the times are "bad" you can admit it but don't dwell on it.

Don't let them see you sweat.

You are not required to know everything and you don't have to be the best at all things. If you were, your title would be "God". You are permitted to say, "I don't know". However, that is to be followed by, "I will find out" and do it. If you don't have the specific skills needed (finance, curriculum,

observations, evaluations, etc.) find someone who does or find where you can get those services. If you need help, ask for it. Asking for help is a sign of strength and confidence not weakness.

Thank people.

Hold everyone (including yourself) accountable.

(Decision Making)

Don't focus on avoiding mistakes. Focus on making progress and achieving goals while minimizing errors.

Don't be afraid of making a mistake. You are not good enough to be a total disaster. Even a less than "stellar" decision usually has some good result. You can't always "hit a homerun" and sometimes a bunt single does the job.

Concentrate on winning wars. You don't have to win every battle to win a war.

Don't maximize one facet of the school's operations at the expense of optimizing the overall operation.

You can change your mind if new information shows a better course of action or if the situation changes. You can't plan for every contingency. Make adjustments as needed.

When someone comes to you for a decision, ask them for a proposed suggestion before responding. This will help them to grow and become more confident. Also, their suggestion may be better than anything you might have considered.

(Internal Operations)

Work to achieve the "spirit" of the law or regulation. Often the "letter" of the law doesn't accommodate every situation in which case the "letters" become recommendations.

Employment is not a reward for having done good things. People get hired for what they can do for the organization. Use a candidate's past history to help determine if she/he has something to offer in the future.

At interviews prospective employees will often give you the responses they think you want. Be discerning.

Generally you should favor candidates who want to join your operation over those who are looking to get away from their current positions especially if they “bad mouth” their present boss. You could be next.

Hire good, well-qualified people. Tell them their goals and then get out of their way. You are not the expert on every topic. They may not do things the way you would do them but they’ll get the job done and, maybe, done better. If they need improvement, provide assistance. Were you always spectacular the first time you did things?

Include people with perspectives different than your own. They will broaden your view of the operation and sensitize you to issues you may never have imagined.

When hiring for a department involve all its members. Distribute resumes for the vacancy and ask the department to select the top 5 candidates (for example). Schedule interviews and invite all department members to participate. When the interviews are completed, hold a discussion to get the department’s input. The final decision is yours to make but it will probably match the suggestion of the department. This provides departmental support for the new member before she/he comes on board.

Support personnel are important. Secretaries, receptionists, custodians, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, etc. are often the “face” of the school and the first point of contact with the outside community. They are valued members of the school team.

An employee dress code (and maybe a modified student dress code) can help create a professional atmosphere where learning is a serious business. An occasional “casual dress” day would be fine.

The number one thing teachers want is recognition and appreciation (even more than money). If you desired great wealth would you become a teacher? You can combine money, recognition, and appreciation into a school-wide bonus program based on the total performance of the school. This avoids the divisiveness of a merit system and cultivates a cooperative culture. Merit pay can be considered later.

Teachers often have had limited experience at a regular job. In order for them to better prepare students for the “real world”, every year at least one professional development day should have small groups of teachers visiting various local companies and businesses to learn about the jobs and work environments available to their students. They should become familiar with what employers are looking for in prospective hires.

Poor performing employees are like bad apples, old fish, or company that stays too long. You have to get rid of them if interventions (mentoring, courses, workshops, etc.) are unsuccessful.

Comments from parents and students can provide valuable information about a teacher's professional performance. Standardized test scores may also be helpful if used properly.

Walking through the halls while classes are in session gives you the opportunity to hear the sounds emanating from the classrooms. Some "noise" is productive and some isn't. You should be able to recognize the difference between enthusiasm and chaos.

You can make pronouncements about policies, procedures, dress code, decorum, etc. at the opening general meeting of all employees. After that time if anyone is guilty of an infraction do not make a general announcement or send a common memo as a gentle "reminder". Go to the violator and discuss the issue directly and privately. Teachers do not want to hear "gentle corrections" that do not pertain to them.

Begin your tenure with tight control. You can loosen up (delegate) as you go along and get a "feel" for how things are going and who can handle more authority. Failure to delegate can "strangle" the school's progress by creating a systemic bottleneck. Eventually the school should be able to carry out daily operations without you. Your responsibilities will shift from day to day operations to general supervision and future progress planning (finances, marketing, vision, goals, etc.).

You should have high visibility with the students. This can be done in various ways. Some administrators prefer to teach a class to stay "in touch". You can do cafeteria duty, attend extracurricular activities and practices, be in the halls at the change of class, participate in pep rallies and assemblies, do bus duty, etc. You could make morning announcements over the intercom to create a school-wide presence and to keep informed of activities and events.

Intercom announcements should not be made during the school day except for special reasons. General announcements interrupt teaching and tell students that what is being announced is more important than what the teacher is doing in the class (really?). Students should never be paged over the intercom (check their schedules and go or send someone to get them). Student names should be mentioned over the intercom for honorable recognition only.

For any assembly, determine who is "running the show". Make sure they know how the assembly will begin and how it will end. The program should begin as soon as possible after all the students have arrived. It will be more difficult to get them settled if they have been amusing themselves waiting for something to happen. Have contingency plans if the assembly ends early (send students back to current classes, sit and talk quietly until told to go to their next class, etc.) or runs overtime (announce over the intercom that students will be arriving late to class, etc.). Always have an administrator present at large assemblies "just in case".

Go to people for meetings. Don't always have them come to you. This shows a respect for them and helps to develop a culture of mutual respect. Meeting outside the "office" can lower the communication barriers. If you do use your office, don't sit behind your desk (barrier).

If someone wants a meeting with you and you have a general idea what it is about, have a few points or topics prepared in advance that you want to bring up. You may not know where the discussion may lead but you will have something to help keep the meeting focused.

Recognition of student achievement is also important. We give banquets, trophies and "letters" for athletic achievement. Do the same for academics. First honors for the year could get a varsity academic letter. Second honors could receive a JV letter. If they make first honors for three years give them a jacket. Second honors for three years gets a sweater. You get the idea.

Make it "cool" to be smart.

Don't underestimate the influence of the position (principal, president, emperor, etc.) especially where recognition and praise are concerned. Give a sincere, "great job", when it has been earned. Try to include some specifics of the achievements in your compliments.

Develop succession plans. Cultivate a small group of employees with the skills necessary to carry out the responsibilities of various positions including yours. These are not "Heirs Apparent" but good candidates for consideration if a vacancy occurs. You want the school to operate smoothly and continue to be successful after you leave or get hit by a bus. They may (should) be qualified to take a position at another school. Congratulate them if they leave and wish them well.

(External Operations)

Keep enemies informed of everything they can learn on their own. It helps to build trust or reduce distrust which is one of the greatest obstacles to public school improvement. Teachers don't trust administrators, parents don't trust teachers, educators don't trust business people, etc. When one group suggests a good idea, the others wonder, "What do they really want?" and progress stalls.

When making a public presentation of any kind, try to get some information about the expected audience. That should help you to better tailor your remarks and to select more appropriate examples for effectiveness. Check out the sound system, podium, stage, etc. in advance, if possible, to increase your comfort level and avoid unnecessary surprises. Have some water near the microphone.

Presentations and meetings should be kept as brief as possible. Attention spans and interest levels are shorter than you think. You may be enthralled with the topic but it's what the audience thinks that

counts. Don't try to "stuff" your audience with data. Have them dine on salient, well-prepared morsels of information that encourage them to ask for seconds.

If someone requests a meeting with you but they don't say why, feel free to tell them at the end of the meeting that you need time to gather additional information before making a decision.

When scheduling small or private meetings, try to get some information about the people who will be present. Knowing your audience helps you to get a fuller understanding of a situation and helps to focus your efforts.

Visit parents in their homes occasionally to conduct business. Some people are uncomfortable coming to school to "see the principal". You can't do this all the time but even a few home visits can pay large dividends with perceptions.

Student performance can be enhanced by parental involvement but all involvement is not equal. At the Seventh Annual Conference on Education hosted by the Vision Coalition of Delaware, the luncheon speaker, Amanda Ripley, author of the New York Times bestseller, The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way, noted that parental involvement with school activities had a minimal effect on performance. The greatest dividends of parental interest in a student's education were paid by regularly asking questions such as, "How was your day?" or "What did you do at school today?" It helps to show that education is valued in the home. Periodically sending a postcard to the homes could help remind (and encourage) parents to ask questions. N.B. the student's answer is not the crucial factor so don't seek an elaborate response. The value of the exchange is the parental interest it shows in the education of the student.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

The Principal (Chief Administrator) cannot sell the school. People assume you will only say good things. You must sell yourself using information about the school. People will judge if they want to send their kids to a school with you as the leader. Parents, teachers, students, etc. can make a more effective sales pitch for the school.

Marketing helps to create the school's image (not just a sales tool) which lays the foundation for the culture. Have someone in charge of preparing news releases complete with photos and quotes highlighting the good things about your school. They should also try to cultivate a working relationship with the appropriate reporter. The reporter will appreciate the help and the school will benefit even if only 10% of the releases are published.

The quality of every piece that is prepared by the school (newsletters, brochures, articles, announcements, stationery, etc.) says something about the school itself. Someone should be designated to review every item for grammar, spelling, tone, appropriateness, etc. before they are sent out to the general public.

Any marketing effort must be designed with the parents' perspective in mind. The effort must focus on what the parents are interested in and not just what you want to give them. Your presentations and materials should not be crammed with information. You should make your audience feel good about selecting your school for their child. Parents should be given a sense of what attending your school will be like for their child and what that child will look like at graduation and beyond. You use information about your school as the vehicle to achieve this objective.

You can meet with prospective parents and students at open house programs at the school. You can meet with small groups at the homes of current parents. You provide refreshments. You can visit community centers or local churches to make presentations.

Devise a means of individual parent communication to notify them of good things their child has done (good quiz score, outstanding classroom presentation, kindness shown, etc.). If it is something to be mailed let the teacher fill in the information but have the office send it out. Do not let the only communication from the school be about negative things (cut slips, late slips, suspensions, etc.).

Get bad news out fast. Don't drag it out or let it drip out over a period of time. People usually find cover ups to be more distasteful than the original incident. If Nixon had confessed and apologized would a resignation have been necessary?

The Chief Administrator must be a cheerleader. You do not have the luxury of being down. Do what you can with what you have. Don't bitch. Be positive but realistic. You can acknowledge a bad situation but start to look for solutions.

STUDENT DISCIPLINE

The goal of a good discipline policy is to have students "internalize" a code of appropriate conduct so that, regardless of external supervision, they will do the right thing. You want to develop self-controlled good behavior.

Education is a business and being a productive pupil is the job of every student.

Discipline policies should emphasize avoidance of misbehavior and not the apprehension of offenders.

Don't let discipline degenerate into a game (catch me if you can). There are more of them (students) than of us and we will lose.

Although it may be difficult, do not exhibit emotion when administering discipline.

Treat students like adults but don't expect them to behave like adults.

Be cautious about issuing "ultimatums" (The next student who does whatever will be severely disciplined.) Invariably such a statement invokes the appearance of Murphy's Law (Anything that can go wrong will go wrong and at the worst possible time) and you will be faced with a model student who has committed a very minor infraction for the first time.

Punishment is a negative act that is a consequence of a wrongdoing. Discipline is a positive act originating out of love intended to correct misbehavior.

There is nothing "cut and dry" about effective discipline. Sometimes a teacher or staff member may ask that a student be given a "little slack" (whatever that means) because they believe it may produce a desired result. If it appears reasonable, you may do it by granting special consideration to that faculty or staff member's request and not directly to the student. This enables you to tailor appropriate action without dealing with a fairness issue.

Parents expect to be kept informed. As soon as reasonably possible contact them about any substantial disciplinary issue and invite them to the school if needed.

When meeting with parents to discuss a disciplinary issue begin by stating that the purpose of getting together is to keep their child out of trouble and to help him/her have a successful life. If you start with a litany of offenses the parents may become defensive and protective of their child. They may also feel that their parenting skills are being called into question. Do not sit behind the desk and, after discussing the misbehavior and consequences, end with a plan of how everyone can work together to prevent future situations.

Students may change, teachers may change, communities may change, etc., but human nature is a constant. All human beings want love, respect, happiness, success, etc. but they see the world around them through glasses with their own unique prescription lenses. Good intentions by one can be perceived as disrespect or a threat by another. Students are humans too and they will react to their perception of reality.

Student discipline should recognize that kids are in control of their own actions. We can't "force" them to do anything (even with threats and punishments) and there are far more of them than there are of us. We have to apply consequences to their decisions and never lose our tempers (at least not publicly), after all, we don't get paid enough to get aggravated. If some students learn where the "hot buttons" are located, they just might push them againand again.

Students are like anyone else. They don't want to be embarrassed publicly. They fear humiliation in front of others more than death. They may "react" (talk back, be disrespectful, etc.) in such situations for the benefit of the audience (in order to "save face"). Public insubordination to a school official may be subconsciously better to them than perceived execution (public embarrassment or humiliation).

Try to correct the student privately (take them to an empty classroom, a deserted hallway, etc.) get them away from his/her audience. If you go to an office, don't sit behind the desk. It can become just one more barrier to open communication. Whenever possible, give the student an honorable "way out". With smaller infractions make the correction and move away. You can come back later to see if there has been compliance. Avoid a face-to-face confrontation if at all possible. It may pay significant dividends later to try and develop a "working relationship" now by showing a little consideration while the student is in an awkward situation.

If there are students who are more likely to violate the rules of the school, don't avoid them. Try to establish a rapport by talking with them, joking with them, sitting with them (only for a brief time because they really don't want you hanging around). You don't want your only contact with them to be negative. They will not become angels but having any relationship at all helps in the long run.

In large group settings, such as assemblies, eliminate student anonymity to reduce potential misbehavior. Walk around the room and up and down the aisles as students enter the area to establish "eye contact". Teachers should do likewise. Teachers should sit at the end of the aisles throughout the auditorium, theatre, cafeteria, etc. to maintain contact with small groups of students. This will make it easier to correct any misbehavior in a less obvious way. N.B., Teachers have a tendency to congregate at the rear of assemblies. Include this seating procedure in your "start of the year" information. Also include it (as a reminder) with the notice to faculty about each assembly.

Before the program begins speak to the students and tell them how the program will start and what they can expect. This should be done several times to small groups of students in the audience as you travel around the room. Tell them that you will soon be approaching the microphone and that when you step up to the podium all conversations should cease.

For assemblies, after you have "prepped" the audience (see above), start speaking as soon as you get to the microphone. Do not just stand there. You may begin with a relatively loud "Good morning and welcome to today's presentation on" but immediately begin to drop your volume to the appropriate level. Teachers can be noticeably standing in the aisles as the assembly is about to begin but they should start to sit down as things get underway. You can say a few introductory things (unimportant) to give the audience an opportunity to "settle down". Don't begin with, "May I have your attention please."

If the lights will be dimmed or turned off during the assembly, have it done very slowly (imperceptibly) and, if possible, leave the rear row of lights on at a low level to avoid creating anonymity. Going to an immediate “blackout” can cause audience unrest.

When dealing with an incident involving more than one student, separate the students as quickly as possible and question them individually. Look for discrepancies in their stories but realize that, in the real world, there will always be some inconsistencies. A red flag should go up if the stories are identical. While you may say the stories don’t match, don’t ever tell one student what another student has told you. If students are sure that you will not disclose confidential information they will be more apt to “open up” to you.

Separate the student from the misbehavior and treat both of them differently. You care about the student but you dislike his/her misbehavior. Any consequences or punishments should be directed toward changing the unacceptable behavior. The student should be given support to help him/her accept the consequences and avoid future difficulties. It is a much stronger argument to tell students that they have to change their behavior over which they have complete control than it is to tell them that they must change themselves because they are “bad”.

Be aware of the “iceberg effect” when questioning students. A student who is guilty of misbehavior is often willing to admit to 10% of the offense to avoid the remaining 90%.

In our culture everyone has about a three foot radius of personal space that, if violated, makes us feel uncomfortable. When questioning students you don’t want to “get in their face” but you do want to penetrate that comfort radius. Ask your questions in a calm, unemotional, almost pleasant manner while looking directly at their eyes.

There are times when searching a student or their locker or belongings is warranted. While a police officer requires probable cause to do so, a school official requires only reasonable suspicion (a much lower standard). The Fourth Amendment (Illegal search and seizure) was intended to protect citizens from the unreasonable acts of the government. The “punishment” of the government for an illegal search is to make any confiscated evidence inadmissible in court making prosecution difficult or impossible. You may not be a legal expert but always act in “good faith” (best interests of the child) and take the action needed to help the student and protect the school. If the evidence you find turns out to be inadmissible, don’t sweat it because, at least, the parents and the school officials will know and can take action.

You can always be sued for something even if you have done nothing wrong. So don’t be afraid to take action in “good faith” for the benefit of the student and the school. I realize this isn’t very comforting but it is reality and you might as well embrace it and not be paralyzed by it.

FINANCE

ROI (return on investment) is an important concept with school finances. You have to know what your expenditures are buying or producing. Sometimes a small increase in expenses can be more than offset by increased revenue (e.g., marketing for enrollment purposes) or increased performance.

Finances are critical for any school and you need accurate financial information to make decisions. The greatest single expense is salaries and related expenses (Social Security, health benefits, etc.) so be conservative with hiring. This is especially true with administrators.

Financial audits can be nerve-wracking but they can be very beneficial. They can help you improve the school's financial operations, reduce expenses, and minimize waste.

Department budgets are approved by the Chief Administrator but prepared by Department Heads. Be flexible. Instruct personnel that they will receive funds necessary to achieve their goals even if they are not in the budget. Unforeseen problems or opportunities sometimes arise. Tell personnel not to spend money if the budgeted purchases no longer appear beneficial. If the department funds are not completely spent it will not result in a reduction next year. A school-wide bonus system helps by making surplus funds available to finance it. This creates a balance. If you are lavish with your spending there is less money available for bonuses. If you are too frugal, performance is reduced and bonuses are lower.

Consider establishing an annual giving campaign. Many parents may be able to contribute and will be grateful to have their children receive a great education at no direct cost to them. There is no such thing as a "free" public education. It is paid for with tax money. These campaign funds can be set aside (restricted) for "extras" (extracurricular activities, academic competitions, construction costs, etc.)

If possible, have all employees on a 12 month pay schedule. This will provide you with a 2 month "cash cushion" at the end of the fiscal year. Any deficit can be made up in the next fiscal year.

CALENDAR

The time schedule for the school day as well as the school calendar should be designed to achieve the school's goals. Both are controlled variables.

Design your school calendar to maximize student performance and not to comply with traditional practices. Students should not go to school for more than 4 weeks straight without a break. It could be a holiday, a professional development day, etc. That separation day provides refreshment for students and teachers alike.

Nothing productive takes place in school after the first full week of June. If you haven't completed everything you wanted to cover with the students by that time include it in next year's plans.

You should schedule a few snow days in your official school calendar. If you don't use them you can schedule some three day weekends in the last quarter when students and teachers are getting antsy.

ODDS AND ENDS

The Nominating Committee of a Board is the most important committee. It determines the composition of the Board and the "tone" of its operations. It can help to avoid micromanagement.

Politics exist in schools. No, really.

Graduation exercises are performances for the benefit and enjoyment of parents and guests. The students would rather be opening graduation gifts and attending parties. The faculty would rather ... never mind. You get the idea.

Facilities can affect culture. They do not have to be spectacular but they should be clean and minor repairs should be done ASAP (remove graffiti, replace broken windows, fix doors, etc.).

Summer time can be a time for enrichment or advancement activities for students.

Professional development days can be noon dismissal days for faculty and staff. The reduced development time is more than made up for by the positive attitude teachers bring with them for a half-day schedule.

The most precious thing anyone has is time. Don't waste it. If you don't have a worthwhile program planned for the faculty, give them a personal professional day. It will show that you respect their time and it will motivate you to provide substantial professional development programs in the future.

If designed properly, Charter schools can correct errors, be innovative, and generally move quickly because of their autonomy (A science course was not getting the job done. A committee of science teachers, some of whom would be teaching the new course, met over the summer, changed the existing course, added a half-credit course, sold the old books, selected new books, and was ready to go in September).

All traditional public schools will make significant gains if we alter “how” they operate through this systemic change in operations. Teachers and parents will have more control of the success of their schools. All schools will be engaged in a collaborative process of continuous improvement and will negate the need for future “Visions” or “Races to Anywhere”.

This shift of power to the local schools will facilitate the consolidation of school districts. Parents will develop a stronger relationship with the individual schools their children attend since that will be the decision making centers for most concerns. As the districts provide more supportive assistance to the operation of the individual schools there will be less need for parents to interact with the districts. Parents will identify more closely with schools and less with districts so a consolidation will be less traumatic.

Since parents are the primary clients (customers) of schools, their evaluations of a school’s performance are important. Standardized test scores, comparison measurements, graduation rates, and all other indicator information should be shared with them. Parents are also concerned about character development (self-discipline, mutual respect, honesty, etc.). They should be asked for their satisfaction level with the school’s performance. Educating young people is a complex endeavor and determining success can be difficult. Parents are in a unique position to provide valuable insights to comprehensive student progress.